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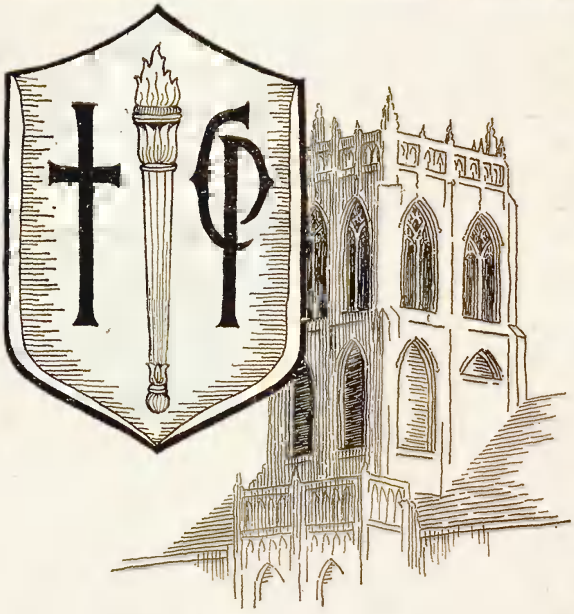
SWAN CREEK BLIZZARD

RALPH CONNOR



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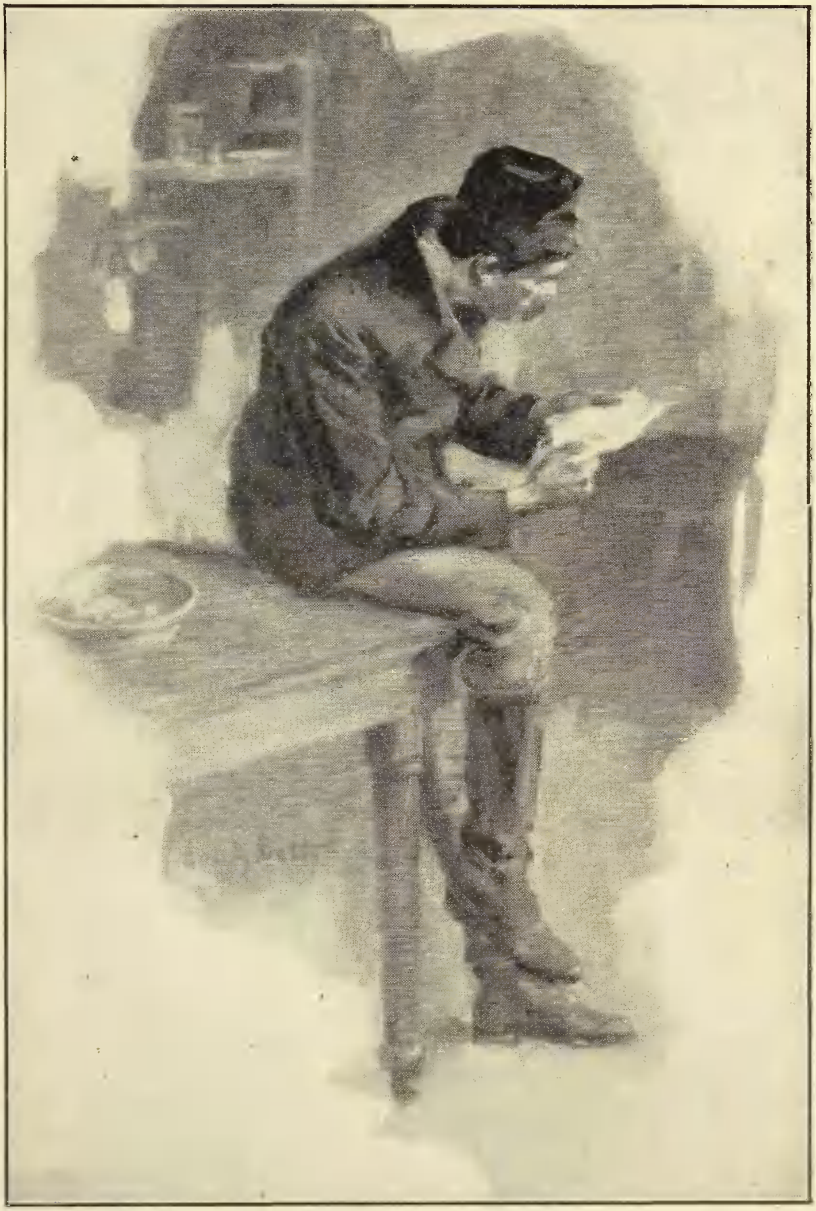

GWEN MAY NEED HELP *see page eleven*

College of the Pacific
Stockton, Calif.

The Swan Creek Blizzard

Gordon, Charles William.

By

RALPH CONNOR, pseud.

Author of

"Black Rock," "Sky Pilot," "Man from Glengarry," etc.

NEW YORK CHICAGO TORONTO

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The Swan Creek Blizzard

CATTLEMEN of the Swan Creek country still speak of the winter of the big blizzard. For three days it raged over the hills and down the coolies, sweeping clean before it cattle and horses by the hundred to destruction. It was that blizzard that piled up more than a hundred and fifty of the XL cattle over the cut bank at the bend of the Little Porcupine; and there they were found a ghastly mass, after the first Chinook had licked up the snow banks. Not for the loss of cattle do I remember it, but for a loss that cut deep into my heart.

How well I remember the springlike airs of that bright December morning. A warm Chinook blew gently down through the hazy hills from the purple

mountains at the horizon and over all the sky arched a cloudless blue. We were sitting, the Pilot and I, with the door of our shack wide open to the sunny air, when Bill rode up.

"Fine spring day," said the Pilot.

"Too spring for me," answered Bill, with an ominous glance at the sky.

"You're pretty hard to please, Bill," said the Pilot. "I could stand about six weeks of this."

"Well, you won't get six hours of it."

"Six hours? Why not?"

"Wall, if I kin read signs, there's the tallest kind of a blizzard followin' up this blasted Chinook," answered Bill.

"How do you know?" said the Pilot doubtfully.

"Every how," replied Bill, before whose experienced eye the earth and sky lay like an open book. "Why, look at them hills; look at that mist."

"You don't call that mist," broke in the Pilot, "that's a lovely haze."

"Haze, is it?" drawled Bill; "wall 'tain't the kind of haze I aspire to this time o' year." Then he went on, "No! before you're six hours older you'll see a blizzard that'll blow till you can't see your feet. Comin' past the cañon trail by the way, the old man up there is laid up rather—just along by the upper trail there, you know, I seen some deer makin' fer the bluffs. The cattle are dreadful oneasy, bunchin' and sniffin'. Oh, you just bet your gold dust there ain't no slouch of a blizzard a hustlin' on the back of that there lovely haze."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Well, I'm goin' to run a bunch of cattle off the open into a coolie, where they won't be drove into next week, and where we kin find them without diggin'."

"Is the Old Timer in bed?" asked the Pilot.

"Oh, jest layin' round, you know. Nothin' too serious, I guess," replied Bill.

"Wall, I'm off," he continued, wheel-

ing his broncho, "better make this your day at home. So long!" and off he went at a lope.

"Good-bye, Bill; come back for supper," sang out the Pilot after him.

"You watch me," he called back over his shoulder.

As the morning wore on, the haze deepened over the hills, and the sun lost its kindly, genial look and glared at the world with an angry, bloodshot eye. The Chinook wind fell into a dead calm. It may have been that Bill's ominous words impressed me, but it seemed that nature was gradually steadying herself for some tremendous shock. The Pilot could not settle to his work. He wandered about the room, looking out now at the glaring sun, and again at the distant purple mountains.

"I don't like it," he said uneasily, "and Gwen is alone up there with her sick father."

"Oh, he is not very ill," I said rather

more carelessly than I felt, and I saw that he detected the false tone in my voice.

After another restless half hour I said, "I shall run across to the Muirs'. I promised to take dinner with them to-day. I'll be back right after." He nodded his head, still looking anxiously at the sky, which was beginning to take on a crimson tint.

I could not explain my own feeling of anxiety during the next hour, and as soon as I could decently leave I hurried back to my shack. I found the Pilot gone. On the table this note lay :—

"My dear Connor—I can't rest here; Gwen may need help, and I have determined to ride up before the storm breaks to the Old Timer's ranch. Get Bill a bang-up supper. He will be tired and hungry. Yours,

"THE PILOT."

I looked out of the window. Large, soft flakes were falling out of a liver-col-

ored sky, and the wind was rising. I hurried down to the Stopping Place stable and found old Latour at the door looking anxiously up at the sky.

"He's near half way dere," he said.

"Who?"

"De Pilot. I tell heem he's fool for go, but he say he's better be fool nor coward." Old Latour was quite excited. "Dat leel gurl, he's fader go seeck. De Pilot say, 'he go up to see heem.' I say, 'he no good see heem. Dis awful beeg bleezard he's not get trou.' 'How long he las'?' he say. 'Free day, mebbe,' I say. By Jeorje, he's mad for go den. 'Tree day, all alone. Not moush,' he say, and pull down hees saddle. I mak heem tak Louis. Das good pony for keep de trail. He's put hees nose into de storm. Noder feller he's put hees tail. Oh dat fine pony, Louis."

It seemed to comfort the old man a good deal to feel that the Pilot was riding a pony that could put his nose into

the storm and overcome the tendency of the native cayuse to turn tail to it. I was very anxious in spite of old Latour's confidence in his pony.

"How long has he been gone?" I asked.

"'Bout half an hour, yes, more," he said.

I looked at my watch; it was three o'clock. The snow was now coming down in long, slanting lines, and beginning to bite. The sky was almost hidden, and had lost all light and color.

"He ought to be about the cañon now," I said, "and then he'll be all right."

"Yes," said the old man, "he's all right nuff, when he's pass de upper trail. Das bad spot dere."

I knew the place well. The highest point on the whole way, where the trail to the Meredith ranch leaves the main Porcupine trail.

"He'll be der now, sure nuff," con-

tinued he, pulling out his big silver watch from his waistband.

"I hope so," I said with all my heart, for even as I spoke I heard a strange sound, such as had never come to my ears before. It was not a roar, it was too soft for that. There was a hissing, beating sound, as if unseen wings, great and innumerable, were sweeping down upon us; an awesome heart-smiting sound. A moment more and the blizzard had struck. I had to fight my way step by step to my shack, and by the time I had gained my door the world had vanished from my sight behind this whirling, shimmering curtain of choking, blinding snow. I had hardly got my fire going when the door was pushed open and in came Bill.

"Wall!" he called out, "how d'ye fancy your lovely haze now? Ain't this a sneezer?" He look round the room, then stared at me and said, "Whar's the Pilot?"

I handed him the note saying, "I was down at Muir's and found this when I came back."

He read it through slowly, and then asked, "When did he start?"

"About half-past two, old Latour said."

He said no more, but took up his leather coat which he had just laid off.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I ain't goin' to sit here if I know myself, with the Pilot somewheres into this blizzard," he answered almost savagely. "Got any brandy?"

"A flask full."

"Roll up a pair o' blankets, and git me half a dozen biscuits. I'm goin' down to the stable. Kin you find your way down there? Bring 'em down."

I felt the bitterness in his voice, and I knew he was blaming me for not following the Pilot at once.

In ten minutes I was at the stable with the blankets done up in two rolls and

the biscuits and brandy in my pocket. I found Bill saddling the Duke's black broncho, Jingo, who, having been in the stable for two weeks, was like to knock things to pieces. But Bill paid no attention to the antics, but stood up close to him while he cinched the saddle and lashed on the one blanket behind it. The black brute squealed and began to plunge, but Bill kept close to him, tying his tongs as regardless of his antics as if he were a lamb. When all was snug and taut he jerked the tie-line loose, flung the long bridle reins over the head of the rearing animal, then with a fierce grip he seized with both hands the rings of the bit, ran the horse back out of his stall, and, with a mighty wrench hurled him clear off his feet onto his side.

"Git up!" he yelled, and Jingo sprang to his feet, more surprised and humbled than he had ever been in his whole previous history. "Stand thar, will you!"

said Bill in a terrible voice; and Jingo stood quite still.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bill, seeing me with my horse saddled and all ready.

"Going to follow you," I said shortly, for his words and manner had so stung me that I had resolved to follow him till I dropped.

He looked at me a moment in silence, then suddenly stretching out his hand, he said in a husky voice:

"Ye're all right, pard, I take it all back," and without a word he swung himself on to his saddle and rode out into the blizzard.

The air was thick with whirling snow, the wind seemed to be blowing from every quarter at once. Every vestige of earth and sky was shut out from sight by the snow-cloud that seemed to wrap one's head about filling eyes and throat and shutting off the breath. By what means he found and kept the trail I know

not, but not once did Bill falter. On he pressed against and through that wall of blinding, choking snow. After the first quarter of a mile, during which it was difficult to keep him in sight, Jingo settled down into a long, easy, steady lope, as if he knew that serious business was in hand. Occasionally he dropped the beaten track, but a plunge or two and he was on the trail again. Keeping his black tail just before my pony's nose, I had no serious trouble in fighting my way through the blizzard. It is not the cold, nor the depth of the snow, nor the stress of the driving storm that makes the blizzard dangerous. It is its power to shut out the world and to utterly bewilder that strikes terror to the heart. Some men and some horses can make their way, however, without hesitation. Such a man was Bill, and such a horse Jingo.

For an hour we fought along, now slowly feeling our way and then breaking

into a lope where the lie of the ground made the trail easier to keep. Suddenly Bill pulled up, and, dismounting, faced Jingo about and gave me his reins to hold.

"Keep 'em just as they are," he said. "I rather think the trail breaks off about here into the cañon. Mind you keep 'em just so. I don't want to lose my direction."

Even as he spoke he passed out of sight, but in a moment or two he reappeared and said:—

"It's pretty tough keepin' your bearin's when you're tryin' to find a trail. I want you to count ten and then holler and keep on till I come back."

In a few minutes—they seemed hours—he came back and took his horse.

"You stay here till you hear me holler," he said, and disappeared again.

Soon his call came and in a short time we were following the trail down into the cañon. Here the track was easier to

find, and before long we were at the Old Timer's door.

"I guess I'll just peek in," said Bill in a low voice, "there ain't no occasion to make no row, case he ain't there."

He opened the door gently and passed in, but came out almost immediately.

"The good Lord help us, he ain't been there," he said with a kind of gasp.

"You didn't see Gwen?" I asked.

"No. Saw Joe. Look here, I'm goin' back to that upper trail," he added. "I think p'r'aps I'd be better alone."

"You go to thunder!" I replied, "don't lie to me. Anyway I'm going with you."

He came close up to me.

"You're a white man," he said earnestly, "but I ain't comin' back till I find him, and there ain't no need for you ——" he paused.

For an answer I turned my horse towards the gate. Bill swung himself up

into his saddle, and in a few strides Jingo was leading me once more.

"Blamed if you ain't white—clear to the bone," he said, turning in his saddle towards me, and somehow his words gave me a great thrill of joy and put new courage into my heart.

Back through the cañon we rode and up to the open again. Once more Bill found the upper trail and came hurrying back to me.

"We ain't got half a minute to spare," he said anxiously. "It'll be dark in half an hour, and then God Almighty help us."

We went along at what seemed to me a reckless pace. But the black horse never swerved from his long, steady lope. After we had gone about half a mile Jingo suddenly stopped short. Before I could ask the cause Bill was off and down in the snow exploring.

"Guess we've struck the scent," he called out. "Come here."

There, half covered by the drifting snow, lay a sleigh overturned, with its load strewn about.

"Whar's the team? Whar's the driver?" Bill shouted to me. "Thar's where the Pilot is. You bet he's monkeyin' round pullin' some fool out o' the snow."

He dropped on his hands and knees, feeling all about, and finally vanishing into the darkening mist of blinding snow.

"Come on," I heard him call, and on coming up I found him with a wisp of hay in his hand.

"They've gone down the coolie, I do believe. Come on!" he cried. He was excited as I had never seen him before. He flung himself into his saddle and shouted to Jingo, who plunged headlong down the coolie. I followed as best I could, and after a few minutes' hard work came upon Bill standing at his horse's head, in the shelter of a poplar bluff.

"Listen!" he said, holding up his hand, and we stood listening for our lives. But only the hissing boom of the blizzard beat upon our ears.

"I swear I heard something just as I—there——" He put up his hand again, and through the storm came the sound of a voice singing:—

> "God in the midst of her doth dwell,
> Nothing shall her remove."

Bill dropped on his knees, and taking off his cap he sobbed out: "Thank the good God! That's him. It's the Pilot." Then he sprang to his feet and yelled:—

"Hello! You dod-gasted fool-hunter, where in thunder an' lightnin' air you, anyway?"

"Hello, Bill! Here you are, old boy."

In the bluff we found them; the Pilot livid with cold and near the last stage of exhaustion, holding up a stranger as they tramped wearily the path they had

beaten around the horses to keep themselves from freezing to death.

"Oh, Bill," cried the Pilot, making a brave attempt at a smile, "you're a great man."

Bill held him at arm's length a moment, and then said solemnly:—

"Wall! I've come into contack with some fools, idjits, blanked idjits"—Bill had lost his grip of himself for a moment—"in my life, but such a blanked, conglomerated idjit, it hasn't been my pleasure to mix with up to this point in my career."

The Pilot by this time was in fits of hysterical laughter.

"And," continued Bill, with increased solemnity, "I cherish the conviction——"

"Oh, Bill," shrieked the Pilot, "for Heaven's sake, stop, you'll kill me if you say another word."

Then Bill paused, looked anxiously into the Pilot's face, and saying: "Here!

Let's get home," rolled a blanket round him and set him on Louis.

"You won't need your hands; he'll follow all right," he said as he mounted Jingo. "Come on."

"Wait, Bill!" cried the Pilot; "what about this man, he's almost played out?"

"Played out, is he?" snorted Bill, contemptuously. "If he's as strong as he smells he ought to get through. Any man that don't know when to leave whiskey alone shouldn't travel without his keeper."

"But we can't leave him here!" pleaded the Pilot.

"Can't, eh! You watch my smoke," said Bill. "If he can't follow with two horses he can't with three."

"Oh, I say, Bill! take him along," said the Pilot earnestly.

"Look here!" cried Bill impatiently, "do you think I'm a blasted snow-plow? Come on! Every second counts. He'll follow all right."

And so he did, and fighting our way through the storm, and dark and cold now grown intense, we made the cañon, and soon after the Old Timer's door.

Bill carried the Pilot in and laid him on a pile of skins before the fire. He was not badly frozen, but he was utterly exhausted. During the three days of the blizzard he lay weak and faint, nursed by Bill day and night. With all a mother's tenderness in touch and tone, Bill waited on his every wish, breaking forth now and then in loving wrath upon his folly for going back after the stranger.

"But he would have been lost, Bill," said the Pilot gently, after one of Bill's outbursts.

"Wall, let him," growled Bill.

"Bill," answered the Pilot softly, "we were lost once, you know."

And Bill turned and looked away and said not a word, remembering, I have no doubt, Him who came to seek the lost.

"WE WERE LOST ONCE, YOU KNOW"

College of the Pacific
Stockton, Calif.

The Pilot never was the same again, but long after, when the first bitterness of his going from us was over, Bill said one day to me:—

"That's how he got his death, seekin' after that lost idjit. It was all blamed foolishness, but I guess p'r'aps that's the best after all."

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